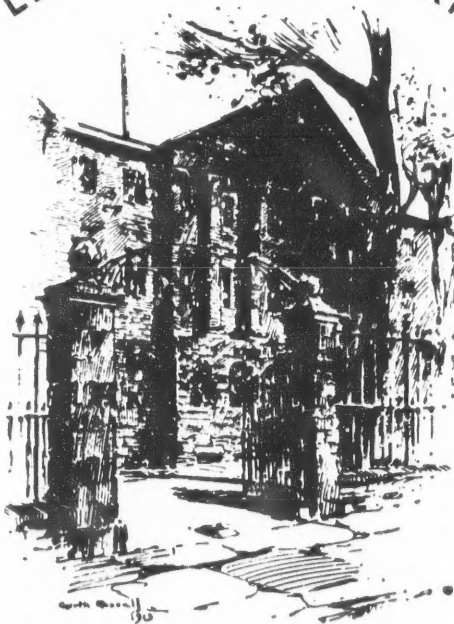


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PROVINCE HOUSE

ON DISSENT.

SERMON.

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ON DISSENT.

A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, ST. MARGARET'S BAY,
ON SUNDAY, MARCH 24TH;

AND IN
ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH, CHESTER,
ON SUNDAY, JUNE 24TH,
1838.

SECOND EDITION, CORRECTED, WITH ADDITIONAL NOTES.

BY THE
REV D. JOHN STANNAGE,
MISSIONARY.

ESPECIALLY INTENDED FOR PLAIN PEOPLE, MEMEERS OF
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.



HALIFAX:
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1840.

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"Now I beseech you, Brethren, mark them which cause divisions, and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches, deceive the hearts of the simple."—Rom. xvi. 17.

SOME of you, my Brethren, may think me harsh and severe in selecting this text for my present subject; but I must beg you to consider that these are the words of an Apostle, of an inspired writer, and that it surely cannot be wrong to place before you what comes immediately from the Holy Ghost. We are not to consult the caprice or will of any man in the discharge of our duty. We are not to enquire whether such and such a text will give offence to those whom it best suits, or not; but our duty, and the good of the Church, require us to give all the information possible upon every point of the Christian doctrine; and to form our sermons according to the peculiar wants and circumstances of our flocks.

The Apostles had received power and command to preach the Gospel throughout the world; and their Divine Master had given them all the necessary instructions concerning the establishment of his Church. No doubt, all the particular counsels and injunctions

which he gave them, before leaving this world, are not mentioned in the Gospels, but there was one subject of too great importance to be omitted, and that was:—*the unity of all those that would believe on him.* The Saviour knew too well the corruption of the human heart, not to caution them against the temptations which were likely to arise out of small differences of opinion among them. He exhorts them in the most affectionate terms to “love one another,” reminding them that they would be known as his disciples and friends, by their being *all one*, even as he was one with the Father. “Holy father,” says he, “keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, *as we are*. That they may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou has sent me.” Here it is very clear and plain that the Lord did not wish his disciples to be divided into parties and sects, but rather that they should be *all one*—that all those who should believe on him were to be united together “into one body,” which is the Church, having Christ for its head.*

Now, when we examine the writings of the first

* It is a great error to suppose that the Christian Church upon earth must be a pure body of men. We nowhere find in Scripture that any church ever existed which was composed entirely of true christians. Jesus Christ himself, while describing the Church, openly declared that “the tares” will grow along with “the wheat”; that “the foolish virgins” are to be found among “the wise,” &c.—It is now a long while since Dissenters have been at work, endeavouring (they say) to organize a pure church, but unhappily, so far, all their attempts have been fruitless. This should teach us to bear with small, or supposed defects in the true Catholic and Apostolic Church, rather than separate without sufficient reasons.

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founders of the Christian Church, we find them constantly employed in establishing Churches wherever the Gospel was received. But what kind of Churches? Were they all called by different names, like the numerous sects of the present day? Did they establish, or organize, five or six different kind of Churches in the same city, or in the same place; each having a different creed, and a different way of thinking and of acting? O! let us not, for one moment, suppose such a thing. There was indeed more than one congregation in some cities or countries, but they were all under one head, or bishop;—they all had the same creed;—they were all governed by the same laws;—and they all worshipped God in the same manner, and with the same words. The Apostles took good care to keep “the multitude of them that believed” “*with one accord*”—“*with one mind.*” Their instructions to them were:—“*let there be no divisions among you*”—“*speak ye all the same language*”—“*obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves*”—“*mark them which cause divisions, and avoid them.*”

But it might be asked,—were there not then some divisions and sects among the very first Christians? To this we would answer, that although there were some in one sense, yet there were none *permitted* or *sanctioned* by the Apostles. It is true, there were some persons, even in those blessed days, who would not always submit themselves—who took more liberty than the Gospel allowed them, and who thought that there was no harm in dividing and separating themselves from the main body of Christians, by adopting

peculiar views on some particular points ; and others were divided in their attachment to different Ministers, calling themselves, some the followers of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Cephas, and others, of Christ. But where and when were all these praised by the Apostle for their conduct ? Where do we find that they received the least countenance from the inspired writers. Rather, does not St. Paul say in our text, “ mark them which cause divisions and avoid them ? ” Does he not call them carnal who merely followed one minister in preference to another, instead of putting all their thoughts and affections on Christ, as the chief bishop of souls ? We need only read the Scriptures to see how the holy Apostles hated and reprov'd all kinds—even the appearance of divisions. In the 20th ch. of the Acts, we find the same Apostle delivering the following charge or commands, to the clergy of Ephesus, in which he appears particularly to dread the effect of dissent among them. “ Take heed therefore unto yourselves,” says he, “ and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God which He has purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, *to draw away disciples after them.*” He knew, you see, brethren, he knew that “ grievous wolves would come in” : that is, men calling themselves Ministers of Christ, without being truly ordained by the Apostles or Bishops, who alone had power to ordain them ; who would also speak

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or teach such things as the true Church had never taught or believed ; and this in such a manner as to make people believe that they were very holy and religious ; and thus, “ *by good words and fair speeches, deceiving the hearts of the simple,*” or the unguarded, for the mere purpose of “ *drawing away disciples after them.*”

But some might say :—there can be no harm in having a different form of worship, and a different society, while we agree in the main doctrines of the Bible ? Let us see, then, what warrant the Word of God gives us for so doing.

It does not appear that they who were causing divisions among the first Christians, always entertained errors of a very material nature. Some are censured for mere difference of opinion concerning their lawful ministers, and for nourishing a greater respect for one than for another. This, indeed, might have appeared unto them very natural. They, no doubt, thought that there was no harm in each of them following those ministers who had been most useful to their souls ; but for this very thing the Apostle tells them that they were “yet carnal and walking as men.” And in another place it was predicted, that some would come in among them, and that even out of themselves some would arise speaking perverse things, that is :—finding fault with certain things in the Church, and having a stubborn and unruly spirit, or wishing to have all things their own way,—“to draw away disciples after them”—to form a party of their own ; and thus to “cause offences contrary to the doctrine,” or in other

words, contrary to the instructions which the general Church had learned of their regularly appointed ministry. It was while speaking of such that they were told that "grievous wolves would creep in among them." The term "wolves" might appear rather harsh and bitter; but what better expression could be used? The character of the persons described, and the actual effect of their conduct, were to *divide* the flock, and to tear it to pieces; and is not this the character of wolves? "Beware of false prophets," says the Lord himself, "which come to you *in sheep's clothing*, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." We should never forget that false prophets, and false Apostles, and false teachers, will generally be "*in sheep's clothing*," will appear very good and very holy—will use many "good words and fair speeches," in order better to deceive the hearts of the simple. It is in no other way that we can account for the many well-meaning men who are often led astray by the deceitful influence of dissent. And, indeed, Jesus Christ says that they would try to "deceive the very elect, if possible."

But, to shew you still better that we are not allowed to disturb the peace of the Church, for every trifling or doubtful objection which may arise in our minds concerning any of her ceremonies, or of her ordinances, I would beg of you to consider attentively all those passages in which the people of God, or the disciples of Christ, are represented as forming but one body, so closely bound together that it can never be put asunder.

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tive Church as the mark,* or badge of union, among believers ; and in the 10th ch. of the first Epistle to the Cor. the following words are to be found : “ For we, being many, *are one bread, and one body* ;”—not two tables—not two different bodies—not two different communions, but “ *one bread, and one body* !” And in the fourth of the Epistle to the Ephesians, we find that God had appointed divers orders of Ministers in his Church “ for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. Till we all come in the Unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto the perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. That we, henceforth, be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive ; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up unto him in all things, which is the head, even Christ ; from whom the whole body, *fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth*, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” Now, Brethren, is there, can there be, stronger language descriptive of the Unity of Christians ? Does this position of Scripture allow us to be brothers only in spirit, or to be united only in half ? If all those who eat of the “ *one bread*,” are “ *one body*,” though they be many members ; and if “ the whole body is to grow up unto

* The Sacraments, no doubt, are the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, which were given to the Apostles and their successors.

Christ, being fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, unto the edifying of itself in love," how is this great and noble work to be accomplished, if we allow ourselves to be carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and by the cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive?"

Brethren!—I would now ask, what do you think is our duty towards you, as Ministers of the Church of England? May we not, in speaking to you, use the same words which the Apostle employed in our text? Have we not been "appointed overseers over you, by the Holy Ghost"; and have we not also received power to "bind and unbind, to loose and unloose," upon earth? Are you not also bound to "obey them that have the rule over you, and who watch for your souls?" And in these times especially, when divisions, and schisms, and heresies, and emulations, and envyings, and strifes, have increased to such a degree that the true Church is almost lost, and can hardly be distinguished among the great variety of false ones which exist, what are we to do, I ask, Brethren? Shall we not also warn you in love? Shall we not caution you against "the cunning craftiness, and the good words and fair speeches of wolves, who come to you in sheep's clothing?" And if we see that our duty absolutely requires us to do so, for the sake of preserving you, amid the confusion which unhappily now prevails in the religious world, in the enjoyment of a pure faith and true religion,—for the sake of your present and eternal welfare,—and in order, so far as

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it will be in our power, to stop the progress of that anti-christian spirit of dissent which threatens to reduce the great body of believers into numberless sects and parties, and if possible, to exclude Christianity from the earth ;*—if we, on all these accounts, I say, feel obliged to exhort you to “ mark them which cause divisions, and to avoid them,” will you not receive our warning, as coming from God, in meekness and humility ? Will you suspect us of possessing any other motive but pure and sincere wishes for the prosperity and eternal welfare of the Church of God ? We hope not. We hope that you will see, yourselves, the necessity of our being a little more active and watchful for the future than we have been in time past ; and that we are bound by the most solemn and sacred ties, to do all in our power to keep our people “ in the unity of the Spirit, and in the bond of peace ;” and to instruct them in such a manner, as will be necessary for them to repel the attacks, or the temptations, which they are likely to meet with under existing circumstances.

It might be supposed by some, that we speak in this way to you from no other motive but that of jealousy, and the desire of reigning alone over the Church.

* Dissent appears to me to be intended by the devil as the most powerful means he can use to undermine true religion among men. This evil is the more dangerous, because it often proceeds from well-meaning, though mistaken persons, and is always covered with the cloak of religion.

“ Separation is the ready way to bring in Popery.”—*Baxter*.

The author would earnestly recommend every Churchman to furnish himself with the following cheap volumes, as excellent preservatives against the torrent of error and confusion which is abroad : “ Potter on Church Government ;” “ Baylie’s Institutions of the Church ;” and “ Difficulties of Dissent,” by Rev’d R. Hobart.

Indeed, I have often heard it said, that it is wrong to allow all the power to one Society, and that the reason why we are anxious to speak against sects, is for fear of losing any of our ground. But I would beg of such persons to consider, that they might just as well have spoken to the Apostles in the same manner. You might just as well find fault with St. Paul, who spoke so much and so severely against all kinds of dissent. He never, nor any other Apostle, organized more than one Church. Was it, then, with the view of drawing all to himself, or of having all the power in his own hands? Or was it not rather because he was appointed by God, and he had received all the necessary instructions concerning these matters? Was it not, rather, because he was told by the Holy Spirit, that as there is but "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism," so there should be but one Church? But very little thought and sound reasoning on this subject, Brethren, will satisfy you.

There is, however, another objection which could be brought forward by ignorant persons. It might be asked—"how will you prove that the Church of England is a branch of the true Catholic Church?" To this I would answer with confidence, (and the most learned and best men among dissenters themselves, have often confessed it,) that our doctrines are those of the Bible, and that our Liturgy may be considered as the best volume amongst uninspired books. And if we add to this the powerful testimony of the best tradition and history, shewing that the Church was first planted in Great Britain by St. Paul, or some of his immediate

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followers, and that our clergy have been ordained in a direct line of succession from the very first preachers of the Gospel, what more can we wish? It is an error of no small magnitude, but very common, to suppose that the Church of Rome was the first in England. A person must know very little of history not to know that there was a British Church in our Mother Country, long before the Pope had any power there.* This, I should think, ought to be sufficient to shew the superiority of our communion over all those of a later date, or of a more unsound faith.

Again, it may be enquired—‘If there be any thing in the Church which our consciences do not exactly approve, have we not, then, a right to leave it? Or, if we find more comfort,† or more pleasure, in another Society, is it not our duty to go to that communion

* At the Reformation, our Church did not separate from that of Rome, but merely reformed herself by rejecting the errors of Popery, and returned to her former and primitive state; therefore the Romans in England, and in this country, are dissenters in reality.

The Catholic and Apostolic Church, established in England, never was a part of the Roman Church, any more than she was a part of the other early heresies which sprang up in her bosom, such as ‘Nestorianism,’ ‘Pelagianism,’ &c. Romanism crept into the Church with her defiling and bloody garments, and for a while shed abroad the cheerless gloom of her distorted and haggard aspect; but like the aforesaid heresies, she was triumphantly cast out, and the purity of the Church maintained! Romanism was driven out *from* us, but she was never *of* us, unless indeed the “tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves,” were considered as parts of the Temple.

† “The plea of better edification is insufficient, for if we look beyond our single selves, and consider our connection with the Church of Christ, we should seek to build up the whole Church.—(Eph. 11, 21, 1 Cor. viii. 1.) And is this the way to succeed—to divide it? ‘The spirit of truth is a spirit of unity.’”—(Jude 19.)—*Difficulties of Dissent.*

where we shall find it best for our souls ?"—This is just the way, Brethren, in which the hearts of the simple are deceived. But let us see what we could say to a man asking these questions.

The word of God tells us, that they who cause divisions, or, in other words, who separate themselves without sufficient reasons, serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, and are carnal, and their sin is so great before God, that St. Paul advises the Romans to "avoid them." We should not, therefore, adopt a step of this kind hastily. No doubt they who left the Church, or who were so inclined, in the Apostle's time, also thought that they had good reasons for so doing. In all times, and in every place, there have been people of a discontented spirit, who easily found fault with the established order of things, and thought that they could devise some better way of governing, &c. &c. But we cannot be too guarded against the deceitfulness of our hearts in these matters, as well as in those of a different nature. "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." If we were willing to find fault we might invent a thousand different things, and reject the very best ordinances of religion, merely to please ourselves.* I would therefore ask a man about to leave the Church in order to join a sect, what will you gain by the change? Are you aware that you must by so doing,

* There are but two cases in which it is lawful and necessary to leave a church; viz. :—First, when it teaches any doctrine *plainly forbidden* by God's word,—1 Tim. vi. 3, 4, 5, and 2 Tim. 11, 16, 17, 18.—Secondly, when a Church is in a state of schism, or of unjustifiable separation from another church, as our text directs us.

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commit a most heinous sin—an offence contrary to the Apostle's doctrine? You may say, "O! but I cannot remain in the Church with a pure conscience," but can you then commit a sin with a pure conscience? Can you cause a division without offending God? Are the things of which you complain, of such importance as to atone for, or take away the guilt of separation? Remember that nothing is taught by the Church of England as *absolutely* necessary to salvation, but what may be proved by Scripture, and therefore,

* Defiling as was the Romish heresy in England, before the Reformation, it is questionable whether the introducing of *schism*, to do away with heresy, would have been any advantage; our excellent Reformers themselves seem to have entertained the same doubts, since they never left the church, while they so strenuously exposed the errors Popery had introduced, and even fought unto death against them. They lived and died in communion with the Catholic Church of England, while they suffered in the flames to prove their abhorrence of the abominations which had crept into her! And if such was, in the opinion of the Reformers, the hideousness of schism in their case, what would they think of dissenters of the present day, who create not only one schism, but schisms without number, on account of such unimportant differences as exist between them and the Established Church? The events of every day are more and more convincing, that the slightest deviation from the communion of the visible Church of Christ, may be the means of causing as much (if not more) mischief, bad feeling, and heresies, as the hateful corruptions with which Antichrist has so long darkened and misled the nations of Europe.

The nature of *schism* is sometimes discussed as uncertain, and I have even been surprised to hear sensible men actually saying that it could not be ascertained. The divisions of the Corinthian Church are also mentioned as the only case in Scripture where the word *schism* is applicable; and it is said that the same term cannot be used as regards the more open and separated bodies of professing christians: but I would ask: if the schismatic Corinthians were such only from some internal discord, and without actually breaking off from each other's communion, how much more criminal, how much more schismatical, if not heretical, must be the conduct of those who form sects apart, and altogether refuse to communicate with other christians in the same place and neighbourhood?

shall it be for the sake of a trifle—shall it be for the sake of a private opinion—shall it be for the sake of pleasing your own fancy, that you will dishonour the Gospel by breaking the unity of the body of Christ. God gave power to His Church to ordain any rule, or ceremony, not repugnant to Scripture; and so, is there not much more religion and christian spirit to submit to the order of God, to live in love and charity with all “the household of faith,” “obeying them that have the rule over us, and who watch for our souls,” and doing all in our power, within the limits of our particular sphere, for the good of our neighbours, and the glory of God, than to try to lead them into sects and parties, and “with good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple?” Be sure, Brethren! true religion is not advanced by all these divisions. The only effect they have upon us is to make us bitter against each other, while we ought to love one another like Brethren.*

* There is one passage of Scripture greatly misunderstood, and often quoted in support of dissent; viz:—the 38th, 39th verses of the 9th ch. of St. Mark, where the disciples mention having seen a man casting out devils in Christ’s name, while he did not follow him; and “Jesus said, forbid him not, for there is no man that shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me.” If this passage were favourable to dissent or division, then it would put the rest of Scripture at variance with itself. But when we consider it attentively, we find that the man in question must have received a direct commission from the Lord himself in order to do miracles. His power of working miracles was a sufficient proof of his authority; and when any of the new preachers abounding in our days can prove their authority in this way, then we shall be bound to receive them. But besides, it is to be recollected that Jesus Christ and his disciples, and all those who professed to believe in him at that time, were members of the same Jewish communion. The Christian Church was not yet regularly organised, and there-

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I would, therefore, conclude by exhorting all the members of the Church to have no hatred or bitterness towards those who differ from us ; while at the same time St. Paul tells us to avoid them that cause divisions ; that is, to avoid their errors, and to walk in "the good old paths," traced for us by the very first Church of Christ. Let us, then, take good care to cultivate love for all men. It is not right for Christians, especially illiterate persons, to strive with each other on religious subjects, but love, and charity, and peace, are the bonds of perfection. If, therefore, others will live in division and schism, let us pray for them, and let not their separation make us think less of the value of their immortal souls. Think not, Brethren, that because some will not walk according to the Apostle's rule, and remain in their "fellowship" as well as in their "doctrines," we should hate them or despise their persons. No, Brethren ! It is their sin which we must hate and avoid.* But allow me to tell you, also, that unless we hate sin in ourselves, we cannot hate it in others, in a proper manner. What-

fore there could be no danger of this man's forming a dissenting sect. The Saviour himself, paid all respect to the then appointed ministers of religion, and required his friends to do the same, *notwithstanding the well known corruption of their church.*

* "When we see how the progress of the Gospel is impeded by division,—when we know that no argument weighs so much with Jews, Turks, and Infidels—that there is none which is so often adduced to quash the conviction of the opening minds of our Roman Catholic countrymen as the question, which religion will you become—which of the many sects into which Protestantism is divided ? how can the dissenter acquit his conscience of guilt in impeding the advancement of Christ's kingdom, and with the selfishness that is characteristic of the age, rest satisfied with this—I hear the Gospel preached, and that is enough."—*Difficulties of Dissent.*

ever is offensive to God in our own hearts, or in the members of our own Church, or in others, we are bound to abhor and to shun. It ill becomes Churchmen to find fault with Dissenters for leaving the Church, while they themselves are living in direct opposition to the rules and counsels of the same Church. While we do not love the Lord Jesus Christ ;—while we are far from God and his ways ;—while our sins, our carelessness, our coldness of heart, our indifference to spiritual religion ; while all these keep us in an unrenewed state, we are as bad as if we were to leave the Church of God. If we leave Christ who is the Head, we must of course have no part with the body. And, alas ! there are but too many who think themselves very good Churchmen, while they have no life in their souls, while they are like the dead boughs of trees, which receive no sap from the trunk, and which must one day be cut down and cast into the fire.

Brethren, try, I beseech you, to obtain a portion of that Spirit, which the Great Head of the Church has promised to give to his true members. Seek it now with all diligence and care. Pray for the Spirit of Christ, without which you can never be members of the Church in Heaven, though you may have been nominal members of the Church upon Earth. Amen !

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